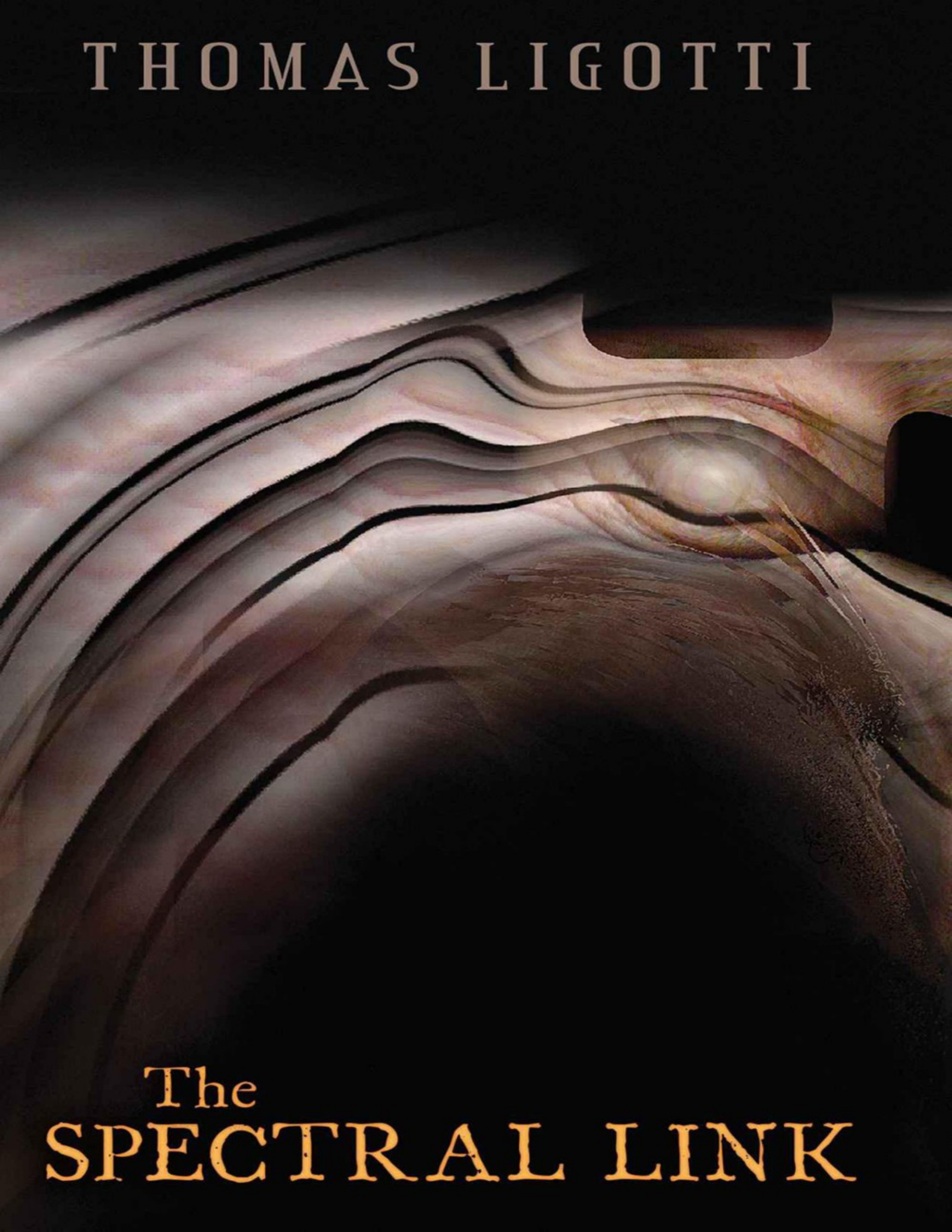
THOMAS LIGOTTI



The SPECTRAL LINK

The Spectral Link

Thomas Ligotti

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To Nicole Ariana Seary

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Preface

To be at odds with the status quo of one’s world can be frustrating to the point of madness. Fear, hate, and desperation are just a few of the mental states that fall to those who would have things other than they are. To become unhinged from the majority is to lose that vital link that keeps one complacently within the fold. Set adrift within the forbidden, the outsider remains on a steady course toward utter doom.

Not infrequently, accommodations are eventually made for the discontented, though they may come too late for those who need them most—the irremediably disconsolate, for example. For them, nothing less than an easeful annihilation upon request will suffice. Thus far, however, this desideratum has been withheld. Quite likely, it is being kept in reserve for the future, when the rigid morals of former days relax, as they tend to do. What once seemed to require a metaphysical upheaval is then accepted as commonplace. Still, none can say that this upheaval did not secretly occur.

Of course, the situation is hopeless for those who wish an alteration in affairs that by their very nature are fixed and define the world in which we are all chained. Their dispute is with reality itself, or what passes for reality. In these instances, no changes are forthcoming—the link to nightmare may seem nebulous, even wholly doubtful, but it holds fast all the same. There is no harm in wondering about certain matters: Who? What? Why? But to ask for answers is to be condemned to a life sentence of silence. At that point, insanity may become the only salvation, that is, until an easeful annihilation upon request is permitted.

Metaphysica Morum

My instructions were to follow a sequence of absurdly simple acts and to keep the operation secret. First, I was to make my way into the assigned environment; second, I would depart in the most natural manner, undetected if possible, though that part was not essential. Such was the basic framework of the dream. Nevertheless, my sense was that the orders I was carrying out would have repercussions in a far greater scheme. While feelings of this kind often inhere in night visions, their quality on this occasion seemed of a nature surpassing anything I had previously experienced in the world of sleep.

The role I was to play was that of a common individual on a "shopping mission," words that suggested to me the most sinister fusion of the banal and the remarkable. I was already in character when someone approached me—the Dealer (as I thought of him)—to accommodate my pretended purpose. His place of business, that "chain of galaxies" showroom, impressed me as having been synthesized in a rented bathtub, as my mind conceived it. At the same time, this was not an unfamiliar environment to me. Once again, I quivered at a representation of the outlandish and the everyday. It was in some way an analogue of the world I desperately wanted to exit by suicide in my waking life, ideally by the administration of an anesthetic—the most benign form of euthanasia. In a momentary flash of lucidity, I even came to the realization that such a procedure was then unsanctioned in both the material realm as well as the most distant frontiers to which I had been directed in dreams.

The Dealer was a lanky specimen who was nearly twice my height. He seemed about to break at the waist as he bent toward me. For what seemed the tenth time, he said, "If I understand you correctly, sir, you are in the market for an *all-new context.*"

“I shouldn’t be able to see so far,” I said. I meant the dimensions of the dream. There seemed no limit to what my sight beheld. Grotesque patterns were in movement seemingly light-years from where I stood.

“You are a metaphysical mutant, if I’m not mistaken. Not even a generation from the swamplands, fertile soil for aberrations of all types.” I now felt a connection to some awful genesis, something transmitting forces of harm to the nucleus of my being. “And you’ve been seeking my services for some time.”

Much more was said, words spoken to me in an unknown language, yet one I understood as relating to schemes of immense repercussions. And there were other things that were not said but still related all the same, as if my mind were communing with itself. There were instructions of intent, infinitely complex processes and principles at work, manifestations that were singular and manifold at once, particular and universal, arbitrary and absolute, all of which were correlated in ways both infinitesimal and immeasurable within my nature. As is common in dreams of affairs beyond sensible conception, which I had experienced all my life and over the years refined into the formulations here articulated, I was overwhelmed by an uncanny dread and thereby phased out of sleep.

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Now, by this time of my life, I usually awoke from such a dream in a state of agitated annoyance, both with the deranged experience I had just undergone and with my ranking as a defective human being, which is to say a human being as such. As a dreaming organism I had long ago abandoned obsessing over scenarios and details of a symbolic standing, tediously auditing that which I allowed to be sucked down the drain of all

psychological point or meaning within seconds of my regaining consciousness of the waking world. And as I have noted, this world itself seemed to me no better than a landscape synthesized in a rented bathtub, oneirically speaking. But on this dream occasion, as I will refer to these excursions henceforth, the words “all-new context” stayed with me and did not disappear into the black hole of my careless memory.

I brought this phrase to the next session I had scheduled with my therapist cum meditation instructor, who hung his shingle outside an old storefront. His name was Dr. Olan. However, with his familiars and clients he preferred to be addressed as Dr. O. This personal designation also appeared on his business cards, as if it were some kind of alias. The simple “O,” he once explained to me, was not a declaration of negativism, as I once hoped, but one of openness to interpretation and non-sectarianism. I found this affectation nauseating, but at the time I wrote it off as part of the whole package that was Dr. O: his gentle yet commanding manner, his projection of a superior erudition, and, despite his shabby place of business, his clearly expensive yet tasteful attire and fastidiously groomed person. Furthermore, I was not in a position to shop around for the help I needed to get me from one day to another. And the only reason I needed such help was that what I really wanted—to be euthanized by anesthesia—was not available to me in the barbaric society to which I belonged. While Dr. O was capable of assisting me in my true desire, I was not so unhinged or unreasonable as to expect his compliance. In fact, he would not even allow me to speak of it due to his expansive acceptance of an objective moral order in the universe.

“An ‘all-new context,’” repeated Dr. O when I told him of my dream occasion. “Interesting.”

“Why is it interesting?” I asked.

“Well, for one thing, it’s so open to exegesis.”

This reaction in no way took me aback. As I have suggested, Dr. O was so blatantly, so ostentatiously open to “delightful possibilities and interpretations” that nothing really meant anything, or not much, in whatever context he spoke at a given time. For this reason, I often felt like murdering him. However, the intensity of my demoralized state of emotion left me with nowhere else to go, since I had been rejected by every other psychotherapist to whom I had previously appealed. And having somewhere to go was at this point all I had going for me, that is, until I went for good, preferably via euthanasia by painless anesthetic. Nevertheless, I must admit that I still felt at some level a totally idiotic need to exhaust every speck of interest left to me in being alive. Consequently, I was drawn in by Dr. O’s use of the word “interesting.” Of course, he knew that this is how I would react, just as I knew how he would react. The whole pitiful drama between us was such that there were no surprises, or none that indicated any progress in my condition. There were only confirmations that everything was just what it seemed—birth, the business of living, and death. This was simple enough for most, but quite intolerable for a moral and sometimes even a phenomenal nihilist like me.

Claiming that he found the phrase “all-new context” to be interesting was a sort of empty compliment, though I could not prove it or I might have saved myself much time and expense. After all, it was not as if I needed Dr. O to perform emergency surgery on my body, just to tinker enough with my brain to keep me from going to ruin in a purely *psychic context*. And what therapist or meditation guru does not use flattery as a tool of leverage when dealing with his clientele? No one who seeks the attention of either type of healer, let alone one who is both, wants to be seen as just another face in the

crowd. If one is defective, as are we all in some way, being *uniquely* defective is something of a consolation in the absence of a cure.

All the same, my resentment of Dr. O was based primarily on his prestige as an authority figure, one who by virtue of his specialized learning could lord it over anyone willing to pay in order to benefit from what he knew, or pretended to know. This attitude toward authority figures applied with special vehemence to those who conveyed, though they may not explicitly declare as much, the condition of being "saved"—that is, of having no need to fret over the plight of human existence. While there is nothing inherently contemptible about the saved, I nonetheless could not help but scorn them. One might say that this was the result of my envy of persons who did not suffer from the defects, or at least the same defects, that I did. To my mind, though, I despised the saved for what I saw as their sense of contentment with the order of being in its physical essence, its psychological essence, and not unusually in a metaphysical essence they contended to experience, so boundless they could be in their outright assertions of directly apprehending all reality.

The whole business of a therapist's or guru's occupation was in my view tantamount to a swindle. There is no necessary or sufficient reason to possess, or feign to possess, a sense of salvation in light of the pain of existence. But because I was taking a chance that Dr. O might do me some good, I had to go along with his being saved, even if it was all an act to cover up the unavoidable harm that awaits us all. As a physician of mine once said in a rare moment of candor, "Everybody ends up badly. At best, it's only the luck of one in a million if you don't see it coming. I should know. It's my business." Afterward, he charged me a considerable sum for an emergency surgery. Such episodes have been a running theme in my life since my earliest days. You could attribute my psychological instability to

this fact as well as to the dream occasions that so suspiciously bled into my quotidian life that sometimes I could not tell one from the other, which hypothetically might be attributed to there being no actual distinction between them.

On top of all of the above-mentioned ordeals concerning my presence in the world, my therapist-guru took liberties that I resented. One of these liberties that aggrieved me also intimated and suggested to me Dr. O's true identity as nothing but a swindler was the following: he was always moving around the city to take advantage of rental rates and lowered property taxes attaching to places that had become undesirable due to criminal activities and other forms of urban degeneration. Dr. O once explained this strategy to me when I complained about coming to see him in a warehouse hovel by the city's docks, a venue that attracted an array of unlawful enterprises.

"An indifference to one's surroundings," Dr. O intoned, "is basic to any psychological or spiritual advancement. The Enlightened One himself relocated from a palace to a life of uncertainty and hardship on the open road, not the other way around."

What authenticity was contained in Dr. O's excuse for his deteriorating professional locales, I could not tell. How else could he explain his questionable migrations—that he was perpetually on the run from creditors as a consequence of some illegal undertaking on his part? Even if I suggested such a possibility, he would only have recast this accusation to conform to his public image as an elevated being who was well worth the discount rates he charged. Naturally, an excuse of this kind would just exacerbate my scorn for the saved and their smug sense of how perfectly right things were in the universe, while at the same time highlighting my impotence to challenge their claim. This inability of mine to impugn their felicitous vision of themselves and everything else only bolstered his point.

Whatever he was, Dr. O was a creature who could flourish in the worst conditions—if only until his day finally came—and this gift went a long way toward confirming his authority to direct the lives of defective persons such as myself.

For me, the consequence of being out of work, which was both a cause for and result of my turning to the services of Dr. O, led me to overlook that his base of operations was situated in what was known as the “battleground district.” I was on my last legs when I saw Dr. O’s advertisement in the classified section of a local publication I found abandoned in the booth of one of the cheap diners where I was taking my meals at the time—and thereafter, if truth be told. To an emotional wreck, the words “fair rates,” which were featured in the classified ad, were good enough reason to overlook a great deal on the side of safety with respect to the “battleground district.” For a time, Dr. O even took me in when I was at my lowest point. He also treated me on an installment plan once I revealed financial documentation of my embarrassed circumstances. “You’ll find something soon enough,” he told me. “I’m sure of it.”

As it happened, the reason Dr. O could be sure of my finding gainful work was that he referred me to a variety of temporary services with which he was associated, arranging for them to hand over my wages directly to his keeping. In turn, his therapeutic treatment of me began, followed soon after by a more ambitious program of guided meditation.

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At this juncture, the average individual might doubt my intelligence in agreeing to Dr. O’s stipulations regarding my work life. But my intelligence was by no means at issue during this time in my life. Instead, the behavior I

manifested was entirely dictated by my state of demoralization. In fact, the whole of my existence had been critically demoralized for one reason or another. From my earliest days, I was unwell with more than my share of childhood diseases. Of course there may be people who have had a diseased childhood without having a bad childhood. But good, bad, or indifferent, my diseased childhood seems in retrospect to have laid the foundation of my subsequent years, which, as I am with difficulty trying to depict, had been years of severe demoralization.

To pursue this subject from another angle, it is not necessarily true that a diseased physical life is the cause of a diseased mental life. Such calculations of cause and effect are too simplistic. More probable is that a diseased physical life may be the cause of an active—meaning overly active—mental life, a life in which mental phenomena predominate and may even seem to have objective form. As everyone learns who has been attentive to their own thoughts, what manifests in one's brain is often directly traceable to what is happening in some other part of one's body. And if a disease is happening in some other part of one's body—or in the whole of one's body, as occurred during my childhood—then you can be sure of having an overly active mental life, even to the extent, as I have said, of perceiving mental phenomena as equally real, or more so, than physical phenomena. When the rest of your body is lying inactive because of an illness, or thrashing with fever and the dream occasions of fever, your brain is left to compensate for this inactivity by overactivity. It only makes sense.

In the end, what I am attempting to communicate is this: my childhood disease made me a thoughtful person, overly so, and too much thinking leads to clinical demoralization, which must be abundantly evident from the previous few thousand words I have written. And therein is the reason that I acceded to Dr. O's overseeing of my work life and control of my finances.

In addition, our arrangement enabled me to afford the modest rates he charged for my therapy and meditational instruction, and at the same time allowed me to live a somewhat decent life in a one-bedroom apartment. In that place, I was harassed by disturbing dream occasions each night, including dream occasions about the Dealer who saw that I was in the market for an “all-new context,” the dream occasion that Dr. O said was merely “interesting” because it was so open to exegesis concerning what I must admit was my diseased mental life. What I did mention to Dr. O was the Dealer’s characterization of me as a “metaphysical mutant.” Here would be an apt place to explain some things about my upbringing and, more strikingly, my heredity.

I was raised in various foster homes, a cast-off infant found in a bus station lavatory who subsequently became part of the government’s child services system. For most of my life, though, I never had a hint of my genealogy, not that I had any reason to be excessively curious. I had my interests, but the identity of my begetters wasn’t one of them. Actually, it seemed something of a vulgar topic to my way of thinking. Then one day, soon after I had to leave my longtime position at a publishing firm because of my debilitating mental state and prior to my becoming a client of Dr. O, I received a letter with no return address. It was postmarked somewhere in the southern region of the country, specifically a region that might have been within the “swamplands” that the Dealer mentioned in the dream occasion at the opening of this autobiographical confession or complaint. Since leaving my job, moving in with Dr. O for a time, and then relocating to a one-bedroom apartment, I have lost all but a few pages of the letter and the envelope in which it was contained. For a time I thought the letter was a ruse of some kind, especially given the integration of articulate learnedness and plain idiocy within it. But later it began to take on meaning when

incorporated within the whole of my biography. In my effort to explain something of my origins and heredity, and perhaps suggest other qualities of my life and character, I will transcribe those pages below, somewhat edited for clarity.

…and so, as I was spraying, cousin, “spraying” you see, jeez sometimes I crack myself up, we orphaned you without meaning anything by it, left you behind in that bus station toilet, nothing personal, we just forgot, having such a big family and all. We had all gone to town to see one of those horror movies where northern folks get massacred by backwoods hicks so inbred, as I should know, that their females can reproduce by what you call parthenogenesis, no joke, while the males sodomize farm animals and unfortunate Yankees who stray onto their property. Southern pride notwithstanding, we love those pictures about swamp-dwelling, murdering crackers, by my granddaddy’s crusty asshole we do, never seen a roll of toilet paper in his miserable life. Not that we’re much better off. Damn if we ain’t shotgun-shack poor. Why, just the other week, me and Clem, my half-ass brother got the other half bit off by a gator, had to bear-trap a couple of tourists wandered into the swamp, probably sight-seeing or whatnot, to get some money so’s we could keep the electricity on, otherwise we might fall down the hole in our parlor room where we shit and piss and other things, snicker. Yankees they was of course. Screamed like coons on fire, yes they did, before Clem put ’em outta their misery by blasting their brains with daddy’s good old rifle what once went off whilst our common sire was picking his nose with the barrel end of it. Clem’s got the gift of doing business with that piece. He’s got other gifts, too, like being able to draw you into his dreams, sometimes you don’t know you’re even in there until a zombie or suchlike comes after you or the planets start moving in

funny ways. But shooting's his speciality, even if he's got no more than two fingers, the other eight being bit off by our dear mother in the fires of holy passion whilst they was at the business of making three of our half-brothers, two sisters, sundry half-and-halfs, as we call 'em, and them such that live in the cellar, don't rightly know how to go about describing them or how they got that way. Sometimes they send up vibrations like they was angered, though mostly they leave the rest of us be. All family freaks considered, though, there's not a fag among us, even if sometimes it can be difficult to say when we's all in the dark, which is most nights, our troubled standing with the state power system being what it is, and because there just ain't enough tourist gold, as Clem likes to say, to keep the lights on as much as we'd like. We can make fire with our eyes sometimes, but nobody's ever got rich doing that, least that I know. Which puts me in mind of those redskins used to live back here in the swamp with us before they got themselves plumb flush with them casinos, seems a white man can hardly get his due in this sun-don't-shine state, God bless the confederate dead and them of us who's among them with our good lord, including my little sister, sent up to heaven by our daddy's squirrel-stick of a rifle went off whilst he was having his way with her, didn't know the thing was loaded no more than he did when he was digging for that nostril meat he loved more than the family dog's hind parts. Blowed his head so far off it went straight through the roof of our home and outhouse, which weren't no loss, the rest of him putting us in Sunday dinners for weeks, waste not whatnot, fried in a pan of possum fat and we got us a feast, woulda been the envy of the neighbors if Clem hadn't got to them some years past, sucked them into one of his dreams and left them there for the zombies most probably. We'd never been on good terms with those folk anyway. It was them or us. Sometimes we get mad at Clem for disappearing walking food when we're

half-starved. Meat's meat and a man's gotta eat, like the cannibal guy says in that movie we went to see back when we left you in the bus station shitter. He planted 'em in the ground up to their head, fed 'em till they was fat, then harvested 'em like turnips. They didn't have a jew's chance in a Baptist pitch-tent of worship. We tried to do much the same with a tourist fella called himself an anthropologist. He made for good company for a time, though, till he finally got us all agitated with his funny talk. He was yakking a blue streak whilst Clem and I was conferring on whether to use the ax to split him down the middle or fillet his pasty skin with the hunting knife and use his hide to fix up the roof where daddy's head went through. That anthropologist fella kind of sounded like the guy gave me your address, name of Dealer. Odd type he was and not to be trifled with. Even Clem felt a queer horror of the man. Seemed to blink in and out before your eyes as you was talking to him. Called us metaphysical mutants, at least I think those were his words. Anywhat, he conveyed that you might appreciate a holler from your kin folks, sorry again how things turned out. Hope you don't—

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So ended what remained of the letter. I think the reader can appreciate from it not only something of my origins and heredity, but also the uncanny reference to the Dealer, still a figure of my dream occasions at that time but one that now filled my mind with a chilling perplexity, particularly with respect to mental phenomena transposed within a physical universe. This feeling was greatly deepened in the next session I had with Dr. O. I mentioned that I continued to have dreams of the Dealer, in at least one of which Dr. O's name arose in a context I could not recall. Instantly, my

therapist and guru went pale. He was also quite obviously at pains to force out his next sentence: “Did the Dealer say anything about an all-new context?”

“I believe so,” I said. “He almost always does.”

At these words, Dr. O visibly shuddered and the file on me that was on his lap nearly fell to the floor. He recovered the folder, however, and hastily wrote something before straightening its pages and securing it in a metal drawer. We then moved on to my meditation instruction, employing a new technique that was supposed to be more effective in quelling my incessant cogitation and, in turn, lightening my demoralized state as a human being who, like most human beings, had no focused idea of what it meant to exist in the world but had to get on with things in any case, whether demoralized or, ideally, in a more or less complacent manner. Roughly speaking, these are the only two ways one can exist, whatever one’s context in the universe, and whatever destiny has dealt you within that context, as I later came to understand more profoundly. Actively seeking an all-new context was, of course, quite another matter, and quite an unusual one.

Following my meditation practice that day, Dr. O sent me packing. That is how I thought of his manner toward me as I reflected on it later in the day. *Dr. O sent me packing*, I said aloud while standing at the kitchen sink in my one-bedroom apartment. He was practically pushing me out the door as I was asking him if he would rather I did not speak of the Dealer in future sessions. In a haughty tone, he said that whatever I determined to speak of or not speak of in our sessions was entirely my decision. Once outside, I heard the door behind me slammed shut and locked.

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Despite Dr. O's seeming dismissal of our discussion regarding the Dealer as well as the business of an all-new context, I continued to have dream occasions in which both played a central role. One of them took place in a setting I had often frequented in my dreaming life. I viewed this visionary environment much the same as I did the Dealer's "chain of galaxies" showroom, which is to say that it seemed to me an analogue of the waking world, however superficially at odds they appeared. In these dreams, I would always be in what I can only describe as a multi-level bazaar, a marketplace without borders that was filled with what seemed an infinite number of crumbling structures of all shapes, many of them with odd, unnamable objects arranged behind warped windowpanes—contorted blobs and twisted figurines contrived and aligned to forbidding effect. And everywhere there were carts with grotesque merchandise dangling from canopies with a leathery appearance, a dried and cracked material that I knew to be human flesh. Both above and below me were dark expanses of jagged stairways and corridors, fragile walkways between tilting towers, and undulating ramps that spiraled down into shadowy depths and upwards into shadowy heights. It was on one of these ramps high above me that I spied the Dealer, who called my name in a reverberant voice. I moved toward him but realized with frustration that I had no idea how he could be reached. Then suddenly I was standing before him. He started walking away from me, gesturing over his shoulder for me to follow, yelling over the din around us, "I got this place cheap. Much better than my old one, don't you think?"

I had to agree with him, if only because the shambles surrounding us was just a pile of my own dream manifestations. On that occasion I had a fixed awareness that I was dreaming, which has its benefits and drawbacks depending on how much control I can exert over my surroundings. In the

next instant, the Dealer and I were sitting on crates across from each other in what appeared to be a storage room for a manufacturing plant of some kind.

“So,” the Dealer began. “Your all-new context. Should we proceed?”

“I can’t answer to a mystery. And would my answer make any difference?”

“Not really,” he said. “But I don’t believe you will object to what is on order.”

“It shouldn’t matter whether I object or not. I’m lucid at the moment, if you haven’t noticed.”

“Nevertheless, you could lose control just like that,” said the Dealer, snapping his fingers. I knew he was right, so I refrained from making a fuss. The last thing I wanted was to find myself crawling through an ever-narrowing tunnel with some monstrosity at my heels. “However,” the Dealer continued, “I absolutely know you will not object.”

“I object to all things but one—euthanasia by anesthetic. You know that, among other things about me.”

“Yes. Not even a generation from the swamplands where you and yours fermented into the metaphysical mutants you are. But you are more advanced than they. And you have followed all instructions to the letter.”

“In your dreams I have.”

“Actually, they’re your dreams. But why split hairs?”

“What about my all-new context?”

“Well, it’s not all that new. If you’ve noticed, things have been trending in a certain direction in that…other world, so to speak.”

“I’m a demoralized metaphysical mutant. You don’t have to tell me.”

“I guess there’s some satisfaction in being right. I’m just the Dealer, so what do I know?”

“I don’t want to be right. I want to be dead.”

“You’re guaranteed that. But I know what you’re saying.”

“So?”

“Ask Dr. O the next time you see him. He’ll fix you up. The world needs metaphysical mutants like you to get where it’s going.”

“And where is it going?”

“Ask Dr. O. He’ll fix you up.”

“Where is it going?”

“He’ll fix you up.”

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That was it. I lost all control of my lucid dream occasion and awoke with the Dealer’s mechanistically repeated phrase about being “fixed up” resonating in my mind. And the word “demoralization” was laid bare as the euphemism it was for the spectrum of astonishing harm our species had ever endured and its *trending* in a certain direction all the more strange and excruciating. Such as it was with our individual lives—from their initiation to their end—so it was with a universal process of disintegration and derangement. As above, so below…and as below, so above. There was magic in things after all, or so it seemed—a metaphysical ideal of the immaterial devolved into appearances. What mockery that I should be part of this movement, a mutant designated to mutilate further the wreckage of the cosmos. Nevertheless, while all signs indicated the substance of what I had experienced, the real still remained as good as a guess. It always has. Yet the nightmare obtains sure, and sometimes may be shared.

Hours later, I was still possessed by the blackest demoralization I had ever known. As the sun rose that day, its harsh light glaring upon the

cityscape beyond my apartment window, I wanted nothing more than to meet with Dr. O. Why I desired this meeting was past my understanding. He had done little or nothing so far to help me aside from arranging for me to work at temporary jobs for which I was completely unsuited. But he was familiar with my dream occasions featuring the Dealer. This fact made him the only person with whom I could share the demoralization I now felt due to my latest encounter with this figure. Of course, in the most recent session during which I mentioned the Dealer and my dreams about him, Dr. O dismissed the matter. But he also sent me packing. And he failed to notify me of his new address, which I found was a walk-up above an old house that was inconveniently situated close to some railroad tracks where the noise and vibrations of passing trains were a regular occurrence. Thus, I could only conclude that Dr. O wanted to be rid of me as a client, which was no great revelation. For my part, the only reason I made it my business to find him time and again was my need for a means to live in my one-bedroom apartment. But now I wanted nothing more than to avail myself of Dr. O's mental health services.

Because Dr. O had not provided me with any way to otherwise contact him, I was forced to show up at his office without scheduling an appointment ahead of time. Nevertheless, he politely, though not enthusiastically, said that he could make some time for me before his next client arrived. When I stepped inside his office, which was actually just a small and sparely furnished room, I was shocked to see that the place looked as if it had not been cleaned for some time. Similarly, Dr. O was slovenly dressed and conspicuously ill-groomed, his signature natty appearance nowhere in evidence. I could not pretend that his transformation had escaped my notice.

“I’ve been ill. Please have a seat,” he said, waving a limp hand toward one of the chairs in the room. Dr. O settled himself on a sofa but did not sit in his usual cross-legged posture. “What brings you here?”

I told him about my dream occasion with the Dealer and my subsequent state of demoralization. Considering his previous dismissal of this subject, I suppose I should not have been surprised that he ignored everything I said. Instead, he seemed to sink deep into himself. Then he started up with his usual therapeutic and spiritual hogwash. The homily he delivered was an apologetics for pain in the world, a mouthful of emptiness that he seemed to have adopted specifically for me as a demoralized wretch and potential suicide. He said something about the diversity of sensations that we might call good or bad, though in reality they were more akin to musical tones that collectively produced a cosmic work of music. Already I was growing impatient with this hackneyed metaphor that I supposed was Dr. O’s attempt to portray disease and agony in human life as no more than grace notes in the ultimate harmony of existence. It was all just so much rationalization, of course, but his words did not contain the usual force and refinement Dr. O customarily mustered. Indeed, he spoke in an embarrassingly diffident and awkward manner. He actually stuttered while talking of humanity’s cries of misery and the yowls of ecstasy, the whole racket of the world, all of which fused into some kind of magnificent symphony. And he gesticulated all over the place as if he were swatting away a swarm of flying insects attacking him. Finally, he fell silent at the obviously tired and borrowed nature of his dharma speech, as he might have styled it. Then he altered his rhetorical strategy. At first his words were no less tired and borrowed than before. Although he was no longer gesticulating, he continued somewhat awkwardly, more haltingly I would say, in the transmission of his message.

“Stop!” I shouted. “Just admit it. You’re a fraud.”

Dr. O smiled sadly. “It took you all this time to notice that? Usually, I’m spotted for what I am after three sessions, six at the most. But you let me run your whole life. It just got to be too much, even for me.”

“That’s why you started moving around? So I couldn’t find you? Come on.”

“Okay, so you’re not as stupid as I thought you were.”

“You always knew what I wanted. I thought if I waited long enough you’d oblige a longtime client. I knew you had the resources. That’s why you were avoiding me.”

He fell silent and just stared into my eyes. “At first that was the reason. I didn’t want to do it. You know, morals and such. And you were really beyond saving. ‘Demoralization’ was your word, but I knew it was something far more pathological than that. At one point I thought I might be able to do something for you. Then I came to my senses. It was that Dealer business.”

“Don’t tell me that a few of my dreams put a scare into you.”

“No. It wasn’t then. It was when I saw him sitting on the lid of the toilet seat in my bathroom one morning. He was sort of blinking in and out. I thought that you had infected me somehow with your insane dreams. I sidled out of the bathroom without turning around. When I reached the living room, right on that spot just behind you, he was standing there. I seemed to be trapped in a humdrum horror movie, but that’s not how it felt.”

“And he said things.”

“Yeah, he said things alright. Now look at me. I’ve turned into you.”

“What did he say?”

“When someone’s standing in your living room blinking off and on like a defective light bulb, it shorts out your brain.”

“Unless you’re a degenerate swamp dweller, or one of their descendants. A metaphysical mutant.”

“What?”

“Never mind. What did he say?”

“All I remember was that he told me things that nobody could know. It was as if he plugged his brain into mine and pumped into me everything in the world, everything in the whole universe. And other stuff I can’t even explain. First I thought I was going to explode. Then anything that I thought was my life as I knew it, that I thought was real, just being alive—it all drained out of me until there was nothing left. And I dropped in a dead faint to the floor. When I came to he was gone.”

“And now you’ve become me.”

“That’s how it seems. I’m sorry I didn’t listen to what you said to me on all those visits. But I had to keep up appearances.”

“It wouldn’t have done any good. You know that now.”

“Sure I do. However I run it through my head, I keep coming up with the same conclusion, the same way out.”

“What about my suggestion, then? It would be elegant. It would be effective.”

“I know. I have what I need. What we need. I was only waiting for you to show up, as you always do. You know, it’s really all your fault that I’ve come to this.”

“You’re the fraud. You invited it on yourself.”

“That’s how I ended up thinking about it. Funny almost. A small-time fraud stumbling onto…I don’t even know what to call it.”

“Schemes of immense repercussions. Or demoralization in all its facets and aspects. Terminal demoralization. We’re a dime a dozen.”

“I’m going to make it up to you.”

“I know. The Dealer said you’d fix me up.”

Olan left the room. It was not long before he returned bearing two filled and capped syringes. One of them was placed in a sealed plastic bag, which he handed to me. Rightly assuming I had never intravenously injected myself, he pushed up one of my shirt sleeves. With two fingers he tapped the veins on the inner side of my arm.

“This one,” he said. “First drink a couple glasses of water to raise it up. Then you just slide it in and push the plunger. Can you do that?”

“I’m sure of it. Thank you.”

I had it now. It was all I ever wanted.

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When I was back in my one-bedroom apartment, I sat quiet and motionless in a reupholstered chair, the syringe on the table beside me. There were sounds from outside the walls and windows around me—cars, people talking, music from an ice cream truck. None of it meant anything. The world was mutating, its every organism trending toward an ultimate derangement. It was not an all-new context, just the way things always had been. Death was guaranteed, as the Dealer put it. Harm was guaranteed. It was not as if what was happening had not been in the works for millennia. I imagined everything I had dreamed as being the truth without question. Maybe something became impatient with earthly evolution, something that was not good or evil, not moral or immoral, something that was just in motion. It was in front of us all the time, but no one saw it, no one wanted

to see it. I found that annoying. I had been demoralized for so long, and all I ever wanted was to get on with the inevitable. Moreover, I wanted to do it in my own good time and with respect and understanding, not hindered and hated because *I was not for this world.* Hence, I feel it my moral right—real or irreal—to leave a suicide note expressing my ire to the unwitting doomed, the ones who, as has ever been their wont, will spurn and decry such a document. Better still, let the following be known as my Suicide Declaration.

Those who contest demoralization as the inexorable way of universal deliverance have failed to see what is before them. They have lagged behind in the evolutionary ideal of our species. That ideal is a beneficial mutation. If nothing else, the demoralized are fortuitous mutants. From the day that marked our kind's awakening to life, such mutants have borne the common task of attaining for the world its true status and to announce its arrival in a time to come. Now it has fallen to demoralized mutants to enunciate their closed-off future. Of all others, they have been assigned with the venture of depressing the inhabitants of the earth, so that the horrors of existence may perish by an entropic process of moral deterioration culminating in a psychically pristine posterity. Into their tremulous hands has been passed an urgency to have these horrors die along with the vessels that contain them, and until then to edify those who endorse in action or a complicity of silence the horrors that flourish in daylight and dark. Any who doubt that the foregoing is truly the case only indict themselves of a willing blindness and depraved ignorance. Those who accept the lines herein are already in good standing with the mutations of a redemptive demoralization. As for the ones who still practice and profit from horrors, they must be condemned not because they are wickedly

content with dozing in sick dreams, which their benighted state renders them helpless to disjoin themselves, but because they are not on the path of a saving self-mutation. They are obstacles to the future and what it wants. The consummate invention of our species' mutants, the future longs for peace and freedom from suffering toward which demoralization points the way; that is, it seeks wholeheartedly an eliminative attitude against all manifestations throughout the universe. Such has been the stance of all mutant liberators by demoralization who have ever lived. As one, their voices have spoken of an end-point to the organic horror. None has ever been fully heard or impeccably followed. They have merely shown the way. This way has always been implicit in their ideal. Closer it draws with the appearance of the demoralized greater in number and more clear-eyed in purpose. This is the way of the future. All who do not know the way, or who refuse it, will be denied the faintest glimpse of the absolute of an anesthetized future. They are reprobate losers waiting only to be declared as such by tomorrow's demoralized mutants. So it will be. We are each either among the demoralized showing the way to a future of eternal nightmare, or we are losers celebrating our moment in hell.

The Small People

Coming of age in this world has always been a strange process. I'm sure you understand, Doctor. There are so many adjustments that need to be made before we are presentable in company. We don't understand all the workings, all the stages of development in the process of becoming who we are and what we are. It can be so difficult. Others expected me to be complete at a certain age, ready to jump up and take my place when called to do so. "Time to wake up," they said."Time to do this or time to do that," they said. "It's show time," they said. And I had better be willing and able when the time came.

Please excuse my outburst, Doctor. I'm doing my best. I know my lines. I've told this story before, as you know. And I do want to be good this time. My parents were always scolding me to be good about one thing or another. "You came from a good family," they frequently said to me, as if saying I was biologically their own could make it so. Now, I cannot claim that their criticism of certain attitudes I held was unmerited. My mother and father resorted to using the words *shameful little bigot* quite a bit. "How could we have raised such a shameful little bigot?" she would say to him or he would say to her. "He doesn't get it from my side of the family," one of them would shout. And then the other, right on cue, would respond, "Well, he doesn't get it from mine either." There it was again—the genetic issue, which might have upset me had I been older and wise to the fact that my status in the family was but a legal fiction. In light of later events, of course, biology was the least of our differences. This is a very delicate topic for me, as you know.

Moving on, my parents would then fight, if only for the sake of appearances, speaking the same lines they'd spoken before. Back and forth, back and forth they'd go at each other. Then finally they'd come back around to their little boy, who was such a shameful little bigot. Obviously, it

wasn’t in their interest to acknowledge the truth—that foremost I was afraid, not bigoted. Calling me bigoted was simply a tactic for confusing the issue. Any hatred I displayed was epiphenomenal to my fear. Every child has his fears, and the worst of mine was a fear of *them.* Not my mother and father. Well, I was afraid of them, too—that’s not unusual. But as a child I didn’t hate them. I hated those others—the *small people.*

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One time my parents and I were on vacation. My father was at the wheel. He was smiling slightly and staring with concentration. That was how he always looked, even when he wasn’t driving—always smiling slightly and always staring with concentration. Next to him my mother sat quietly. The sun was shining on her smooth face. She had such a smooth face, Doctor, and big eyes. I was sitting in the middle of the back seat, minding my own business and taking in the wide spaces of the scenery, not focusing on anything in particular. Then I saw the sign just off the right side of the road. It had one of those simple faces on it, and written below were the words: SMALL COUNTRY. My whole body tightened, as it always did when I saw one of those road signs. The arrow at the bottom of the sign pointed straight up, so that drivers would know they were in range of small country.

I slid over to the right side of the car and began to survey the landscape. A short distance from the road we were on was another road, a smaller road. It meandered through an open plain slightly below us. I shifted my eyes toward the front seat and saw my father looking in the rearview mirror at me. But I didn’t care. This was the closest I had ever been to small country, and I wanted to see all I could, which for a long

while wasn’t anything except that empty plain with that small road passing through it. Such is the perversity born of fear. At the same time that I wanted to see something, I was terrified of what I might see. I felt as if I were having one of those dreams where you’re alone but still feel the presence of something unimaginably awful that might appear all of a sudden. It was at the height of this nightmarish sensation that I saw the little car turning a bend in the small road. About the same time, our road—the big road—started curving toward the other. The closer the little car came to us, the more I felt the urge to dive to the floor of our car. But then I would have missed seeing them.

Their car, the little car, looked like a toy. It wasn’t exactly its size that demoted it from a properly motorized conveyance to a plaything, because the pretend car wasn’t so near our real car that I could compare the two. It was the flagrant actuality that everything about it was toy-like, as if it were made of molded plastic and rolling along on teetering wheels. And it bore none of the details on it of a real car, at least that I could tell. Structurally, it had a simple square body painted bright red. That had to be the color, of course, just so that it would stand out in the scene, and I could be all the more afraid than if its color had been white or yellow or some shade of blue. But I stopped attending to the car once I saw what was inside.

Until then, I scarcely had a glimpse of any small people. My strange fear of them originated mostly from the simple face on the road signs that alerted people, real people, of their impending entry into small country. The mere idea of the smalls was enough to make me anxious about something I couldn’t name. And after looking into that red plastic toy, I was sorry I hadn’t thrown myself down onto the floor of our car, even knowing that my parents would have called me a shameful little bigot for the rest of the vacation.

After our cars passed each other, my father looked in the rearview mirror and said to me, “So, did you see them?” I didn’t say anything. I was defiantly silent.

“Your father asked you a question,” said my mother. “You should answer him.” But I maintained my silence. And if I had spoken, I wouldn’t have said anything about what I saw in that car. I wasn’t even afraid at that point. I was bitter and resentful that my father could have asked me in such a bland tone of voice if I saw them. I wanted to scream at both my parents, scream murderously and also with some puzzlement, a plea for understanding. How could people, big people, have such a complacent attitude toward the smalls? How could they give certain presents to children for their birthday or any time presents were in order when those presents might look like that little car and the small people inside it? They were travesties of real people, that’s all they were—two older small people, like a father and mother, in the front seats, and two young small people, whose gender I couldn’t tell at a distance, sitting rigidly in the back. How could there even exist certain toys, for instance an imitation baking oven—a play version of the real thing, yet one that quite probably replicated the actual baking ovens used by the small people? Even if the resemblance wasn’t one-to-one between the two miniature ovens, the thought could still enter a child’s head, “This oven must be something like those the small people have in their kitchens.” Who could be so stupid or malicious that they could ignore the possibility of such a thing—that an object some children might have in front of them, or even in their little hands, could have a counterpart in small country? It was too monstrous to contemplate that at a certain age children can and do become cognizant of the likeness of their toys to entities in the small country world, including the small people who live

there, if they are even alive. Why didn't they react, as I had, with fear and hatred once they came of a certain age?

Naturally, I knew that for practical reasons the world of the smalls and the real world were securely set apart, just as borders between places of divergent laws and customs were partitioned and even guarded with powerful weapons against each other. But it wasn't the same between the smalls and everyone else. This was something I felt deep inside me, though I risked being stigmatized as a shameful little bigot not only by my parents but also by most anyone wherever I went.

For the rest of our vacation that year, I was miserably anxious as well as miserably hateful. From the moment my father asked me if I saw what was in that little toy car, my hatred for the small people that grew out of my fear of them reached its zenith and held there. Of course, I had seen them, idiot father of mine. Why did he ridicule me, taking their side? At one point, all of the occupants of the little car suddenly swiveled their heads toward us, then abruptly swiveled them back to their previously fixed positions. To my mind, they did this as if to say, "We know you are looking at us. Now we are looking at you. Now you know that we knew you were looking at us. And henceforth there will be no escaping this mutual knowledge." *Those damn swivel-heads,* I thought, even though I could only imagine what went on in their heads, because in fact they appeared to have nothing going on inside them. They were just hollow, empty things.

Not long after this encounter, my father pointed out the window. By the side of the road was another sign with one of those simple faces on it. Below that face were the words: LEAVING SMALL COUNTRY.

"All clear," my father said with a vexing condescension in his voice and a slight smile on his face.

“Oh, leave the boy alone,” my mother said, but only as a sort of warning that my father was taking things too far. Right then, I could have thrown a fit the likes of which my parents had never seen or suspected of me. Nor was it wholly improbable that I might have leapt into the front seat and steered our car into the roadside ditch, which was of some depth. I might have killed us all, or perhaps only my father and mother. But then, in a flash of mentation, it occurred to me that with the demise of my parents I would likely fall under the care of another couple whose attitude toward my fear and hatred of the small people probably would not have differed from theirs. Certainly my disposition was not in line with that of the larger share of humanity. In good faith, I have to admit as much, Doctor. I know you must be aware of the torment an individual suffers when he begins to wonder if he is the one on the wrong side of reality. Perhaps it was a defensive tactic of my mind, then, that though I was still afflicted by fright and hatred when it came to the small people, I also felt for the first time a curiosity about them. Surely that signaled a healthier perspective, and I welcomed it.

My newfound curiosity waxed and waned for about a year or so. It either intensified or abated depending on how often I awoke sweating with sick horror after dreaming about the small people. I finally acted on my curiosity only after I had a dream in which real people, including myself, were somehow changed either into small people or *half-small people.* The latter particularly disturbed me. *Yes,* I thought, *now is the time.* And so I began my quest to get to the bottom of the mystery that, at least for me, surrounded the small people.

The library seemed the natural starting point to research my subject. In no time at all, it seemed, I could find out all I needed to know about the small people. And possibly what I learned would terminate, or at least

temper, my fear of them, and even alleviate, or dissolve entirely, my hatred of their kind. But I was only a child with a rudimentary conception of how things truly were in this world at its deepest level. I found out soon enough, though, that I had misled myself.

I was ahead of my class in school and knew my way around a library better than most children my age. Thus, you can imagine my devastation when I failed to unearth any substantive information about the small people. How could there be such a gap in what would seem a vital realm of study—what conspiracy of silence, what code of secrecy was in effect that I could find hardly a mention of these creatures, not even in the form of records or statistics relating to them? Yet ultimately I was forced to conclude that nothing was being hidden from me or the rest of the world on the subject I attempted to investigate. At least, it wasn't being hidden deliberately, consciously. That would have been an impossible task. Some blabbermouth is always around who is unable to keep what he knows to himself—chatterboxes without whom the details of humanity's most lurid episodes would be lost—let alone something as conspicuous as the small people. No, Doctor, only one thing could keep them out of the limelight—pure neglect, a protective disinterest, as the old philosophers of the human psyche might have seen it: the mind's looking away when unsettling facts come into view, facts that one would rather not focus on for long. Where the small people were concerned, there was nearly a blackout of intelligence.

I'm not saying that no one has ever ruminated on the phenomenon of the small people. No doubt everyone has pondered their existence at some time or another. But such considerations have never been sustained long enough to create a body of inquiry and knowledge. Before pen could be put to paper or an expedition launched, some negating incuriosity set in that dissipated any spur to action, or any action that resulted in authoritative

books and peer-reviewed essays in specialized journals—all that might comprise a modest shelf even in the middling libraries of our world. If you should say that even highly arcane matters, not to mention anything right before our eyes, have evaded the closest research, I would have to respond, perhaps a bit vigorously—*false*. Question: How could we know we were keeping certain truths from ourselves regarding how things truly are in this world at its deepest level? Answer: Because we have done it before. Do I really need to give particulars? And many continue the charade long after some voice indicates beyond credible doubt what is true and what is not. *The time has not come yet,* I thought. And perhaps it never would.

In point of fact, though, I must admit to having heard vague mutterings about the small people when I was at the library that day. For instance, I came across a history book—that is, a book concerned with *our* history—and in its index there was a reference to a footnote in which the author alluded to the small people. In that footnote were written the words: "Of course they have no recorded history of their own." Naturally, this scrupulous scholar adduced his source for this assertion in the usual style, and it made me so happy to read the arid citation "See Paulson," or maybe it was "Hayworth," possibly "Heywood." Whomever I was told to see, I sought out. But nothing was contained there—nothing to corroborate that the small people had no recorded history of their own. Why would a scholar of any standing slip up that way, leading the reader to a source that did not support what he had written? Mistakes do happen, no doubt about that. But how could it be that they happened whenever someone wrote something about the small people, as I discovered they always did? All day long, one book led me to another and each left me empty-handed. Was I being diverted here and there by falsehoods, or were bits of truth being parceled out in such a way that no complete picture formed of the small people, or

none that could be placed beside the one we had of ourselves in the great photo-album of humankind—a portrait that itself began to seem incomplete to a child who believed until then that we knew everything that had anything to do with our world? The big world, that is.

During the hours I spent that day in the library, I went from basement to belfry, only to find myself cornered by the walls of one dead end after another. With studious intent I walked into a repository of learning with the light of a beautiful morning shining upon me and my self-appointed mission. But great clouds rolled in, thunder shook the walls, rain tapped louder and louder against the windows and lightning flashed outside them. By degrees, the neat hallways of the library I had entered turned to dank and dripping stonework corridors of a Gothic castle through which I wandered in search of a way out. I trembled as if trapped in one of those dreams of mine where I feel surrounded by unseen horrors. At last, all I wanted was to wake up. But I couldn’t awake, not until I had some answers. Abandoning the library in disgust, I returned home and moped about for weeks in a stupor of desperation and nervous suspicion.

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Not long after that inauspicious day of wasted labor, something happened that helped me come back to myself, such as I was, while also advancing my obsession with the swivel-heads. Until then, I was no expert at making friends. How unexpected it was, then, that I should make a friend when I needed one most. I was so surprised because nothing in my life had ever worked out that way. For once, I actually gained an advantage over my circumstances.

It was after school, after the time between leaving home to go to school in the morning and leaving school in the afternoon to go back home, where I waited for it to be time for dinner, time for doing homework, and then other times until it was time to go to bed before it was time to wake up again and face another round of times to do things. In any case, on the day in question I made friends with this other boy. The reason for this fortuitous bond was that he spoke the following words: “Damn those small people.” I asked him why he said that. I also asked if he was afraid of the small people as I was afraid of them. He said he wasn’t afraid of the small people, but I didn’t believe him because of the way he said this. His eyes looked away from me, and he started to fidget. His voice became very quiet, too, until he stopped talking altogether and just stared at the ground. Then he looked up at me, shaking off the fear that possessed him, and said in a boisterous voice, “I’m not afraid of those dummy-things. I just hate them.”

I smiled and said, “I call them swivel-heads. And I hate them, too.”

Immediately we became friends and began spending time together every day after school, that is, until it was time for us to go home for dinner and then go through all the other times there were. We played games the way young people do, or are supposed to do at that stage of development. We wrestled quite a bit, but there wasn’t anything mean or crazy about it. We also talked a lot about the small people. One theme of conversation to which we often returned involved catching one of the smalls and what we’d do when we did.

“I’d twist its arms until they were backwards.” To me, that seemed like something you could actually do to the small people, even if my only basis for this conviction was a brief sighting of them while on vacation a few years before. “Then it would have to do everything turned around, like eating with its back to the dinner table, if they even eat. It would have to

reach for its food without being able to see it," my friend speculated, warming to his vision. I pictured the scene for a moment.

"Yeah," I said.

We laughed quite a bit about small people whose arms and also legs we had twisted backwards, as well as other things we would do if we caught one of them. Eventually, we became so exhausted from laughing that we were out of breath and had to sit quietly for a while. That was when my friend smiled at me in a certain way. Not smiling slightly like my father did, but smiling as if he was thinking something very particular, looking at me with a questioning expression on his face. And right then I had the feeling I could read his mind and he could read mine. From that moment, we became more serious in our talks about the swivel-headed dummy-things. My friend also shared with me a secret. What he told me was that his father—maybe his mother, too—also hated the small people. "My grandfather hated them even more. He thought all sorts of things about them and what he called their *powers.*" Then my friend confided that his father always knew the location of small country, and their family moved every so often to avoid it. "We're going to be moving again pretty soon. Dad says that the smalls are too close already…and they're getting closer every day. He even let me know where new small country is going up, so I won't get too near it."

Not long after that day, I asked my parents if I could sleep over at my friend's house. He did the same, asking his parents if he could sleep over at my house. Our ruse worked, and on the night we were supposed to sleep over at each other's houses we instead met at a pre-arranged location—the lavatory hut in the old park on the edge of town. When I entered the small wooden building, my friend was already studying a wrinkled piece of notebook paper on which he had drawn a map. "Here's where the small country is going to be," he said, pointing to a place a few miles outside the

town’s limits. “It’s secluded right now, my dad said.” According to my friend, however, it wouldn’t be long before the signs were put up and everyone would know it was there. “Not that they could do anything about it,” my friend said.

“Yeah,” I replied, knowing that whoever complained would be called a shameful bigot or some roughly equivalent term of reproach. As my friend and I sat cross-legged on the floor of the lavatory hut, it became increasingly apparent that neither of us was entirely dedicated to our plan of stealing our way into the presently secluded region of small country and capturing one of its residents. And the longer we waited, the more our project deteriorated into something ill-conceived and probably unfeasible. Ultimately, though, our doubts were overcome by our hatred.

“The small people,” my friend said. That was all—just three words spoken in a tense, quiet voice. Yet those words gave vent to a rage at something that had seized his life. I looked at him and saw all second thoughts written on his face transform into a spirit of determination. No doubt he saw my own features overtaken by the same spirit.

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We entered the secluded small country by way of a little road that was in the process of construction. Some small children were loitering in the area. Construction sites are always a temptation for children, though these small children weren’t behaving in the usually rambunctious manner one might expect if they had been real children. They didn’t see us, or so we assumed. But it wasn’t long before they started to walk away from the hidden spot where my friend and I were observing them. It was probably time for them to be somewhere, I thought—time to do whatever the smalls

did at that hour, for by then it was almost full evening. They moved with rigid, mechanical motions, and we shadowed them easily. We could have caught up to them and grabbed one, pulled it back over into big country—normal country, I mean, the real world where real people live. But I don't think I could have brought myself to do that, as much as my friend and I had talked about it. I looked at him, and he shook his head, so I knew he felt the same. At that point, I'm not sure that either of us knew what we wanted to do. Again, our plans were coming apart.

We kept following the smalls, though. I noticed that even if they weren't moving very fast, they did seem to be moving as fast as they could, as if they were hurrying to get somewhere. Their arms and legs shifted around in the manner of prosthetic limbs, making them look almost crippled, though not crippled so that you felt sorry for them, I should say, but maimed in a way that made you want to keep your distance, as if they could infect you with some dreadful condition. Eventually, we saw lights ahead. With an artificial radiance, they flooded the darkness on the other side of a hill that the small children were approaching. And when they got to the top of the hill, they paused for a moment, their silhouettes outlined against the sky by the lights shining on them from below. For a moment, it was a rather picturesque tableau. But soon the small children did something with their heads, raising them up with a slow mechanical motion by elongating their necks, like a telescope sliding open a little. Then they swiveled those heads around without moving their bodies—turning them just enough so that it seemed they were looking at me and my friend. Both of us dropped to the ground as if we had been shot. In the darkness, I heard my friend whisper, "Those rotten, horrible smalls. You can never know what they're going to do. I hate them so much."

"Yeah," I murmured in soft response.

When we looked up from the ground, the small children were gone, no doubt having moved down the other side of the hill. It couldn't have been a very steep incline there, or so I calculated. Otherwise, the smalls—with their awkward, practically disabled bodies—wouldn't have been able to negotiate the descent. But when my friend and I ran up to the hilltop, moving in a crouched position, we saw that it was almost a straight drop over the edge. And the small children were now walking like broken robots down below us. Their destination looked like a little toy town that was evidently under construction. "See," my friend said. "My dad knew it. Pretty soon all of this land around here will be small country."

They were moving around like mad in a kind of pit. Stretching out for about a mile was a half-built town that was almost a double of the town where my friend and I lived. The smalls were hopping around in a frenzy to finish it, as if they were on a tight schedule. "Maybe they have to complete the place before a certain time," my friend conjectured. "Why else would they be working at night?" *Or maybe that's just the way they are,* I thought. All kinds of small building machinery were positioned along the town's main street, though none of it was in motion. Small people who looked as if they were directing operations stood with their stubby arms outstretched, pointing in all directions or inspecting unrolled building plans held tightly by their tiny digits. Everyone seemed busy with some project—putting up storefronts that had little detail or identifying features, working on skeletal frameworks that maybe were going to be houses, or carrying around what appeared to be prefabricated parts that would ultimately be integrated into the toy town. On several street corners small people were yelling through staticky bull horns. But they didn't seem to be addressing anyone in particular, and what they were shouting wasn't distinguishable as anything but gibberish. As a matter of fact—just pure, natural fact—when I

considered the scene before me from its smallest to its most prominent features, the whole enterprise of the small people's town-building seemed to be nothing but an act. They weren't building anything with point and purpose at its core, anything that was more than a spectral illusion—they were putting on a show. Whether or not this was intentional on their part intrigued me for some reason.

Once I had thrown off the strangeness of the spectacle, I could see how rickety, how shoddy everything was. All the buildings were crooked or unevenly sized with respect to the town as a whole. The windows were more trapezoidal than square or rectangular, and the shutters attached to some windows hung loosely, flapping against the walls behind them. A light breeze could have caused the town to collapse and blow away, which may have accounted for the disappearance and emergence of so much small country within real landscapes. I knew that all towns, and even cities, in the big world would eventually go to ruin in time, however sturdy they might appear for however long a period. Thousands of years of towns and cities in the past had proven that. And thousands or millions of years awaited the dissolution of the world as it now stood. But this town was not made to last. It was as if the small people knew there was no point in bothering with permanence. As I said, that explained a lot to me about small country—how it was always moving from one location to another, as my friend's father was aware so that he could move his family away from wherever it rose up after a period of seclusion. But there was also something more. They sought no permanent standing in the world. For them, existence was all chaos, nonsense, and emptiness. I knew the same had been written about our world, the supposedly real world. But that was opinion, speculation. And only very few had claimed as much. Yet the small people as a lot seemed to embrace these objectionable qualities as truths. Now it became more

explicable to me that they should be passed over in the archives of human thought. Theirs was not a lone voice speaking out of time. Theirs was a society subsisting, even thriving, on the brink of nonexistence—an enigma that repulsed wholesome deliberation by real people. And their habitats were all but ruins upon inauguration.

No one in the big world, or very few, mentioned that the fully extinct leavings of towns like this remained after the smalls relocated, because once a place had become small country it was left alone, as if it was not fit to be reclaimed by real humans, as if the earth in these places had been polluted by an alien occupancy, and only pestilence abided there. You know this as well as I do, Doctor. But nobody writes about this fact, and its corollary that one day there will be no room left for a real world to be built—the unreal was moving in. I believe I realized this truth at a deep level within me during the one brave day I spent at a middling library. And now I was shaken by it to my marrow.

Maybe there are grubby pamphlets passed around among people like my friend's father, crumpled pages whose possession would cause someone to be branded as a shameful little bigot, you might say—an outcast. So anything that appears in print or otherwise about the small people is labeled as pernicious ravings and propaganda. There are means for hushing up what people would prefer not to delve into. But I've already gone into that.

Gazing at the new small town going up, such as it was, was to witness the intrusion of an unnatural colony of beings into the anatomy of our world—not a different race or group, but something that did not belong, neither here nor anywhere conceivable by human senses or cognition. It was something unknown that had taken form, or was in the process of taking form, coming of age in a world it was displacing. That night with my friend brought so many things home to me. A new phase in my sentiment toward

the smalls had begun fermenting within my being. “None of it is real,” my friend said. “I don’t know what it is.” A creeping sense of something hitherto concealed overcame me, as I’m sure it did him. Fear had now gotten the better of both hatred and curiosity. Beside me, my friend whispered: “Let’s get out of here.” In sync, we jumped to our feet. When we turned about, though, I almost lost consciousness. For behind us was a regiment of small people standing in a semi-circle. How long had they been there? To me, that was more frightening than discovering their presence—being watched without knowing it by a group of smalls.

They didn’t speak a word—neither to us nor among one another. Nothing shocked me about that, but it did add to the disorienting unreality of the situation. For a time, they stayed in place. Paradoxically, they appeared gigantic, that is, gigantic for toys, given their toy-like aspect. For instance, their clothes seemed to be painted on them, not worn by them. And their faces were so smooth, gleaming in the moonlight without any of the characteristic qualities of flesh. Despite their masculine semblance, their faces were beardless. They were also unwrinkled, unworn by time and somehow immortal. This was how they had always been, created somehow but not developed in stages from birth to their present age. There had been no process of coming of age for them, I thought later—no birth or death or all the things in between that trouble our own existence, or at least troubled us when we attended to them. There was only going through the motions, a pretense of life. In a way, they were a mirror of us—of what we wanted for ourselves. They marked time and nothing else. Time to do this. Time to do that. Time to make another town. Time to relocate, having poisoned a new landscape with small country.

During the standoff between the smalls and my friend and me, an uncanny stillness prevailed. But then their heads swiveled simultaneously.

Each turned toward another. They didn’t seem to be exchanging glances, though, or even looking directly into one another’s glassy, empty eyes—not as my friend and I looked to each other with the same thought in our minds. We couldn’t run around them, because they surrounded us. And we didn’t want to jump down the steep incline at our backs and land in the small town. So we began to move slowly through their ranks, not knowing what to expect. While we had come there to harm them, our taste for that was now lost. It seemed to us, as we later talked of it, that we could not understand them at all or what malevolence they might harbor toward us.

Very slowly, then, we sidled our way among them, and they didn’t attempt to block our path. However, they did do something, or seemed to do something. This was to lightly press their bodies against ours as we passed. That turned out to be worse than any brute physical encounter we could have had with them—their touch. For they were not stiff and rigid as we expected, not the hard, plastic toys we might have neatly torn apart, bloodlessly dislodging their seemingly prosthetic limbs. Instead, we found that they were soft, very soft. Their shapes felt as if they were giving way as they lightly pressed themselves against us. But they were also swivel-headed dummy-things—freakish unrealities like their town and maybe everything having to do with small country. Did they even exist as our minds conjured existence, both our own and that of all else within our perception? What were these things that seemed to be all appearance and no substance? Fortunately, such questions did not paralyze us.

Once my friend and I were on the other side of the smalls, we ran without pause to where we commenced our terribly misconceived incursion into small country. The rest of the night we spent shivering with cold and fear in the lavatory hut at the old park on the edge of town. The only time we spoke was in the morning. Just before we parted for our respective

homes, my friend looked at me with an abysmal expression on his face and said, “My dad will kill me if he ever finds out what we did.”

“Yeah,” I said, drawing out at length that single, stupid syllable, exhaling it in a dead voice.

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Not long after our misadventure, my friend moved away with his family. And before the end of that school year, those signs went up with the simple faces on them. They first appeared at the edge of town and then proceeded for some miles along the open road beyond. I made a point of going around and finding all the signs I could, noting which direction their arrows pointed to indicate small country. I saw that people still went to the old park. They must have been aware that small country wasn’t far away, but that made no difference to them, not as it did to me.

A few weeks before it was time for the new school year to begin, I received a letter from my friend. It was hand delivered to me by my mother, who first took a moment to interrogate me about any packs of cigarettes I might have hidden in the basement, which was where I happened to be at the time, lying on an old sofa we had down there. After that night in small country, my friend and I tried smoking cigarettes for a while. I think we both wanted to do something we’d never done before, something to make us feel we had changed and were no longer those kids who talked so much about the smalls. I kept the last pack of cigarettes we shared, and my mom found them. I hadn’t even smoked since my friend moved away.

I was elated when I got his letter, which was only a single page. But I read that page countless times, savoring its words and even reciting them in my friend’s voice. There was nothing more in the letter than my friend’s

banal depiction of the new place he was living and the school he would be attending. That was enough to relieve the sense of demoralization I felt since he had gone. I wrote back to him, of course, and that initiated an exchange of letters between us, and even some phone calls. I told him that I still had the last pack of cigarettes we shared, even though my mother had taken them. What I never asked him was whether he had made any new friends.

In mid-winter, I opened the latest missive from my friend after a hiatus during which he had answered none of my letters. What I read in it revived a kaleidoscope of memories and emotions, none of them welcome to my still delicate state of mind. The news my friend related was that his father had disappeared about a month before. One day, he didn't return from work, and his family had heard nothing from him since. My friend didn't write a word about any particular suspicions he had, and that I also nurtured. He did say that the police had come to his house. As a rule, his mother wouldn't have allowed them into their home to poke around. His father had never trusted the police or any other persons of officialdom, and neither did his mother. But in this circumstance, that rule went out the window.

The police didn't find anything that interested them in the house, but when they looked around the garage they turned up a lock box hidden underneath a workshop table. My friend's mother gave them permission to open it, and inside they discovered, as my friend quoted them, "stacks of literature." Then he wrote, "Both my mom and I were fairly certain that what they called literature wasn't pornography or anything of the kind. It was stuff about *them*." That was the first reference to the small people I could recollect appearing in our correspondence with each other. Naturally, this was a subject that we didn't want to linger over. My friend continued regarding what was hidden in his dad's lock box that the police pried open:

“Some of it was in envelopes with postmarks from all over the world.” The police rummaged through the material until my friend’s mother told them there wasn’t anything in there that would help them find her husband. “The cops didn’t say a word after that,” my friend wrote. “I thought they might. It seemed to me they should have, the way they were looking at each other. But they just piled the envelopes and stuff back in the box and shoved the box back underneath my dad’s workshop table. Then they left, and we haven’t heard from them since, the bastards.”

For a few days, I didn’t know what to write in response to my friend’s letter. I considered phoning him, but I didn’t think that was a prudent action to take. Finally, I composed a short letter of vague condolences and hopes that his dad had business he thought it best not to share with him and his mother. My letter was a mass of circumlocutions that I was sure my friend would understand. To my grief, I never received a response to that letter, and it was almost spring before I could admit to myself that I would never hear from him again.

I said that my friend avoided mentioning the smalls in our letters. However, as I later pored over our correspondence I saw that he had written something to me that I blocked from recall. The erasure of his words from my memory was understandable, for what he wrote was simply too strange to reflect upon for very long. If you’ll remember, Doctor, I posed the following question: “How could we know we were keeping certain truths from ourselves regarding how things are in this world at its deepest level?” And the answer I gave to my own question was this: “Because we had done it before.” Well, that’s exactly what I had done when I read what my friend wrote to me in one of his letters. Here is my recitation of it from memory: “My dad got drunk last night and told me things I had never heard from him before. I didn’t understand most of it. What I do remember was his

repeating what he called a *spectral link* between the smalls and some people in the real world. Then he went on about people who looked and acted like humans but were not human. Maybe he said they were not *completely* human. He did have a term for them. It was *half-small people*."

You might be able to comprehend, Doctor, how disquieted I was to see written in my friend's hand certain words that, at least in concept, had occurred to me only in a dream. I hated to think that there was a *spectral link* between myself and the smalls, and though I have spoken of peculiar truths regarding how things really are in this world at its deepest level, truths that we keep ourselves from knowing, I concluded with stark lucidity that there was absolutely *no* spectral link between myself and the smalls—not as I understood my friend's father to have used these words. If anything, it was exactly the opposite. The small people were drastically alien to me. I was derided by my parents as a shameful little bigot because of my fear of them and my hatred of them, feelings that I had not known to exist in anyone else besides my friend, and vicariously through him his father—and his mother, too, it seemed, who I believe had also gone the way of the rest of my friend's family. But where they had gone I couldn't bring myself to ponder.

While continuing to be afraid of the smalls and to hate them, I now transferred these emotions with a rabid vehemence toward the half-smalls, who my friend added sometimes devolved—or whatever the proper term might be—in both appearance and nature into small people through and through. Following this transformation, which they might not even know was possible or consider desirable—there was nothing for them to do except move into small country and live among their kind, that is, if they didn't regard this prospect as so repellent that they took other measures rather than lose the sense of *who* they were, or thought they were, and *what*

they were, or thought they were. With its small people, this world just seemed a preposterous mess to me, and now it was revealed to be even worse than I knew. Why couldn't things be different? What would it take for our lives to make some kind of sense? Maybe that's just not possible, I thought. Maybe any world would be just as preposterous. Yet the existence of the half-smalls nevertheless still inspired in me a crawling fear, a new unseen horror, as I've mentioned having this sensation in dreams, along with a hatred of them for having what I thought was a *weakness* connecting them in some spectral manner with the small people. At least the latter were something of a phenomenally known quantity to my mind, however little I understood about them. But the halfers were something else—interlopers in a world where they didn't belong, the source of all questions about who or what human beings might be as a life form. For as tiresome as it has become, the question of what it means to be human continues to fervently preoccupy us—because without that definition we cannot positively know if our laborious self-perpetuation is worth the candle we keep lit in the blackness of the universe. We cannot decide whether we should continue or terminate the human race, if there is anything that might be called the human race, since we are as fragmented in the aggregate as we are as individuals—things of parts and not the integrated organisms we represent to ourselves. All the same, as naïve and arrogant as this may sound, I felt that my sensibility enabled my insight into this immemorial affair. I thought of this sensibility as a type of instinct that actually *forced* me to see things as they were and not as I was supposed to see them so that I could get by in life.

From this point on, as I walked the streets of the town where I lived, I could see only how contrary everything was to the picture of it I was psychologically strong-armed into having. Now the place where I grew up

was no more than another preposterous mess. The town's motto on the sign as you entered Main Street was: "A Good Place to Live"—not exactly a boastful statement. In actuality, though, it was pretty crummy. Not crummy *in itself,* I should say, because I had never lived in any other towns. They might be as crummy as my native town. The whole planet might be crummy for all I knew then. When I looked closely at the city hall, for instance, I could see it was wobbly. Maybe at one time I would have thought nothing of walking through the wide front doors of the place. Now that my eyes could see that they tilted quite visibly, I wouldn't have entered its space on a dare. Or take the post office. If my mother had ordered me in her most calmly intimidating voice to go buy her some stamps, I wouldn't do it. Not one foot would I set inside, because its bricks were set together all wrong. One of them could slide a little, I gauged, and the walls might come crashing down in a flash and bury me alive as I was standing in line to buy some rotten stamps which had images on them that were so faded and cock-eyed I couldn't tell anymore what they were supposed to represent. Once they were printed with images of monuments in one place or another where my family went on vacation, as I remembered in my mind's eye, but from then on they appeared all bent up and sagging. And they were all supposed to be *so grand.* Taken in total, the whole world was supposed to be *so grand.* But it wasn't, not from my perspective, which was no longer so muddled I couldn't see things for what they were and not how I was supposed to see them. In my view, all the earth and anything that stood upon it was just like the town where I lived—not a *good* place but a *crummy* place. Even new places that people were always rushing around to build were crummy from the start—wobbly and tilted, bent and sagging. All the energy and hustling that went into building a car wash or a row of stores that seemed to shoot up overnight like mushrooms—it was just so useless.

And the most piddling events were elevated as a matter of course beyond their significance, as testified by the ubiquitous Grand Openings wherever you looked. It was all supposed to amount to something, whatever it was. Everything had to be imbued with consequence. But nothing amounted to anything. It was all just trying to be what it wasn't—real, that is, authentic in every sense of the word, and not fatally bogus.

I could see the same thing in people that I did in the flimsy material world, this junkyard of cast-off ectoplasm. They didn't meet expectations either, though, as I said, no one yet has been able to say definitely who or what we are. And I don't think anyone will ever be able to do so. I don't think they want to. What I do think they want is to say that humans, real humans, are this and that and the other thing—that there are millions of qualities humans have that nothing else has, and they say all this to keep us confused, to keep themselves confused, about what humans really are, except that they're not small people. But now I was fixated on the half-smalls. Now my sensibility, my special instinct, had become sufficiently honed to discern who was what. Not that I expected any consolation from such knowledge—it was simply something to do while I decided what to do with myself.

At first, as I walked around town during the summer after I stopped receiving letters from my friend, I wasn't sure exactly how my sensibility was functioning. I would get a feeling, like a tingling inside me, when I saw certain people strolling down the sidewalk or sitting at picnic tables outside the frozen custard stand that did land-office business throughout the summer months. I'm sure you get the picture, Doc. It was show time and nothing but. No doubt some clickety-clack version of it was being enacted by the smalls, as I was now with some confidence able to imagine after beholding one of their own towns in its construction stage, a poor excuse

for even the crummiest human town, if one wants to get into degrees of crumminess, that is.

All things considered, my wits were in relatively fair working order, and my sensibility was becoming more and more sharply attuned. Occasionally, the tingling sensation I felt in the proximity of certain persons caught me off guard and pierced my spine with anxiety, but for the most part I was in control. Within the span of about a week, I not only felt something about those people but also began to see little things about them, things you wouldn't notice without an exacting gaze. After my confrontation with the small people and detecting the smoothness of their faces, which were bereft of the character bestowed by time, unwrinkled and unworn, I saw a family resemblance in the same people who set off that tingling inside me. I wished my friend could have been there, because I was sure he would have seen the same thing about them—that they were halfers.

Some days I'd walk from one end of town to the other, and I'd pick out the real people from the half-small people. As I passed by each person I would check off their identities in my mind—halfer, real, halfer, real, and so on. Mr. So-and-so—halfer. The old woman who walks her dog in the park every day—real. Schoolteachers—halfers every one. Cops, too, all halfers, which made me think of my friend's family and the investigating officers who found the literature under his father's workshop table. The girl who sat next to me in math class—real. I was glad about that. The middle-aged lady in the window at the beauty shop—everyone thought she had a facelift done, but she was a halfer. With children it was more of a challenge sorting out the real ones from the halfers. Most of them I let pass as real. There was one group of kids, though, all spindly specimens with empty stares. They had to be half-smalls.

All told, I judged about half the people in town as real and half as halfers. I had gotten to be quite proficient at spotting our citizens as one or the other—too good, in the end. I really should have shut off my thoughts sometimes, but I couldn't do that.

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It was Saturday, and my dad was off work for the weekend. My family always barbecued hamburgers and hot dogs on those days and ate them together around a plastic table in the backyard. We don't tend to see our parents the way we do others. We're too close to them. Even if they make you miserable and call you a shameful little bigot, they're still your parents—special circumstances notwithstanding. But after all the time I spent around town separating the real people from the half-smalls, I scrutinized everyone the same. More to the point, I felt that tingling inside me. Being with both my mother and father for an extended period of time on a Saturday afternoon, and sitting with them around a plastic table in the backyard, I was tingling like mad. My father was smiling slightly and staring with concentration as he always did. But I never noticed that he was really staring at nothing in particular—that he was more or less gawking with bottomless eyes. And though the sun was shining on my mother's smooth face, her big eyes weren't squinting. Furthermore, they didn't look right or left, up or down. They were just big eyes like a big doll would have. The longer I sat with my parents eating hamburgers, hot dogs, and potato salad with no egg whites, because from the first time I ate potato salad with egg whites I refused to eat it again that way, the more I tingled inside. My parents did what they had to do in order to be real parents to me. But we weren't biologically related, as I'm sure it says in your file on me. I was

adopted as an infant, and now I knew that I was only a prop, something to aid them in not being found out for what they were.

Before they told me, I already knew somehow that I was adopted. And I was never happy about that. But on that Saturday as I sat eating dinner with my parents around a plastic table, I praised whatever there was to praise that I was adopted, or else I would have been a halfer, too, if in fact that's the way it works. Nevertheless, I was pleased not to be their real offspring. I couldn't be sure, of course, if reals could give birth to halfers or the other way around, since I didn't know how the spectral link between the small people and the real people worked. My friend was taken from me before I could learn more about that, and maybe about other things. I hated that—I hated it with all my being. And what happened, as I mentioned, was that all my hate for the small people transferred to the half-smalls. Now I wondered if the reason for that transference wasn't due to my subliminal recognition of having parents who belonged to that weird species.

Retrospectively, it made all the sense in this clockwork world that my father and mother were halfers—the way they reproached me so often about being a shameful little bigot when in truth I was not a bigot but a real person who was afraid of the small people and couldn't accept the arrangement the big world had with them. Maybe real parents would have understood that, I don't know. I wanted to think so. I wanted to think that there was something sensible, or at least something of marginal value about the tick-tock world I had been born into. But the two halfers sitting with me at that plastic table only berated me as a shameful little bigot, certainly because they wanted to stifle my sensitivity to how things were in the world at its deepest level and to muddle my brain as I came of age, going through all the adjustments in the process so that I could be presented in company—that is, so that I would be a sightless moron like everyone else, everyone

except people like the only friend I ever had in my life. In a split-second, as I sat munching my hamburger or hot dog and watching my mother and father that day, I was hopelessly possessed by hatred for them.

That night I lay awake in my bed for a long time, earnestly trying to arrive at some way to live with the household status quo, just as real humans had arranged at some time in the past to live with the small people, though no book I could find would pinpoint when that was or how it was done. But there was no way I could do that—no way at all.

It must have been around the middle of the night—I didn't plan a specific time—when I entered my mother and father's bedroom. They were lying on their backs in bed, the moonlight glowing on my father's slightly smiling face and concentrating stare as well as on my mother's smooth face and big eyes, which were open. Both their eyes were open. I don't know why. Maybe they didn't sleep. It wasn't as if I was the sort of person to peek into his parents' bedroom to see what they were doing.

"Dad, Mom," I said, just to get their attention. They didn't even sit up in bed, though. Maybe they were sleeping, in their own way. "Listen," I continued. "I want to tell you something. What I want to tell you is…" Then, with all the lung power I could summon, I screamed: "I'm a shameful little bigot. I hate the small people. I hate them for all I'm worth. But more than I hate the small people, I hate you."

Then I jumped on the bed and was all over them with the knives I'd gotten from the kitchen. *Push, push, push. Chop, chop, chop.* They didn't make a sound the whole time. I can tell you one thing—halfers aren't soft like the smalls. I really had to work on those things that called themselves my parents.

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I wasn’t exactly amazed that I never saw the inside of a courtroom, knowing as I did what I knew. I didn’t know, however, what would ensue in the aftermath of my deed—that I would be locked up in this place. Whatever it is, it isn’t a prison, not with the superlative educational facilities you’ve provided, allowing my mind and sensibility to flourish. If our positions were reversed, that would be my scheme—cultivate me like a plant, breed me into something that could express its view of the world at its deepest level. You were ready for me from the very first, so I have to assume I’m not the only one to do what I did, and for the reason I did it. That’s right, isn’t it, Doctor? But I’ve been here so long. How many more doctors must I see who want to hear my story? Are you in training or something? I’m as sane as your shoes, we both know that, even though I should have gone mad long ago from my dreams alone. Why can’t we make a deal, come to an arrangement? I’m practically an old man. My coming of age came and went. I’d kill myself if I thought you’d let me. That’s not what you want, though, is it? Could you please give me an answer just once?

Everything is such a mystery with you people—halfers I used to think, but I don’t know anymore. I lost my instinct for that the moment I stepped into this place. Did you do that? And what about the tingling? That hasn’t happened in who knows how long. It would be nice to see a clock or a calendar every so often. Don’t you care about time, whatever you are? How about space, existence, all the commotion of reality? I’ve known it was all just a preposterous mess for ages now. I also learned that I should be on the outside, and the rest of this ludicrous world, or most of it, should be in here for study and rehabilitation, adjustment and readjustment, if that’s the point. What are you trying to accomplish? Whatever it is, you seem to be doing a

terrible job of it. Is everything still as crummy as I remember it? Your world, whichever one it may have been, was an offense to my eyes. And it didn't have to be that way. But maybe that's the way you wanted it—a nightmare from morning stool to bedtime stories.

Oh, here they come—the big boys. You can tell them to take their hands off me. Big boys with big hands. But are they really big, or only half big? I believe an autopsy could establish the facts, if you'd allow me the pleasure. My parents were half-smalls. The alignment of their bones was human enough, but their organs seemed all of a piece. It could have been they were starting to convert, I don't know. So what's inside of the small people, Doctor? My guess is that they're composed of some doughy substance inside and out—a flabby clay that can be molded into any form, having no identity of its own. Is this really our world, the real world, or is it theirs? Did the right hand of evolution know what the left hand was doing? And what about the spectral link? I have my theories. I've had lots of time to think about that, for what it's worth—thinking. Give me a hint, something to mull over. I just need a speck of hope to keep me from going to pieces—a little truth to hang onto. Answer me, Doctor, before I'm dragged off. Who are you? What are you? Answer me. For the love of all that is real—Who am I? What am I?